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# Al Shabaab and the Challenges of Providing Humanitarian Assistance in Somalia

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*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the American Enterprise Institute.*

Somalia is one of the most inimical countries to humanitarian aid workers. The security context and the humanitarian operational environment that both local and international aid agencies face have severely restricted humanitarian activities, particularly in areas under the control of the radical Islamist group, al Shabaab. Aid organizations responded to al Shabaab's threats by limiting areas of operations or fully suspending operations in southern Somalia. The majority of the organizations that remain active in Somalia have concentrated operations in and around territory under government control in Mogadishu, territory under the control of government-aligned administrations in central Somalia, and in the semi-autonomous regions in northern Somalia of Puntland and Somaliland. In the south, the withdrawal of humanitarian aid organizations has exacerbated the effect of the Horn's severe drought on the Somali people.

The drought in the Horn of Africa has left over 3.2 million Somalis in need of immediate food assistance. Of these, 2.8 million live in southern Somalia, an area that has proven to be the most inaccessible in the country. There is a famine in Bay and Lower Shabelle region, in parts of Middle Shabelle and Bakool regions, in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in the Afgoi Corridor, and also in the IDP camps in Mogadishu. The UN has noted that two other regions, Lower and Middle Jubba regions, are expected to be experiencing famine conditions. The hardest-hit regions remain under the control of al Shabaab.

Denial of access by al Shabaab militants, and in some cases by other armed militias, is the single greatest obstacle to the provision of humanitarian assistance, as noted in the UN's most recent monitoring group report. Al Shabaab not only creates a prohibitive security environment, but also restricts humanitarian operations in southern Somalia. The group has banned many international aid agencies from operating within territories under its control. Al Shabaab has enforced this ban with violence: militants raid local offices, destroy foodstuffs and medical supplies, and kidnap aid workers. The group's actions against aid organizations have created the humanitarian emergency that many Somalis now face.

### **Al Shabaab's History with Humanitarian Assistance**

Al Shabaab has increasingly become an obstacle to the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Somalia, the majority of which consists of food aid. There has been an evolution in al Shabaab's position toward international aid organizations. Over the years, the group has solidified its stance against the activities of aid organizations, claiming that many American and UN-funded organizations have a "Christian" agenda and do not pursue the best interests of the Somali people. Local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also faced pressure from al Shabaab to end their activities. The group has frequently accused aid workers of spying for Western intelligence agencies or has targeted those organizations whose operations also support residents living under the authority of the UN-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG).

On July 20, 2009, al Shabaab announced its establishment of the Office for the Supervision of the Affairs of Foreign Agencies (OSAFA) to monitor the movements of all NGOs and international organizations operating within Somalia. The same day, al Shabaab accused the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Department of Security and Safety (UNDSS), and the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) of engaging in activities deemed hostile to Islam and ordered all of the

organizations' offices closed. Al Shabaab militants immediately enforced this edict, raiding the UN offices in Baidoa in Bay region and in Wajid in Bakool region. The group had already forced CARE and the International Medical Corps to close on suspicion that the two organizations provided the intelligence leading to the successful U.S. airstrike on former al Shabaab leader Aden Hashi Ayro. By November 2009, the local al Shabaab administration in Bay and Bakool regions required that humanitarian aid agencies abide by 11 conditions, including a registration fee, the removal of all logos from vehicles, and a ban on female employees.

Al Shabaab leadership particularly targeted the UN's World Food Program (WFP), severely impacting its operations in southern Somalia. In early November 2009, al Shabaab deputy leader Sheikh Mukhtar Robow Ali, also known as Abu Mansur, accused the WFP of destroying Somalia's local agriculture market through its distributions of food aid during harvest time and banned branded aid, including aid with the American flag on it. Al Shabaab then ordered the WFP to only purchase food from local farmers and to clear out all food warehouses by the end of the year. On January 1, 2010, al Shabaab militants raided a WFP warehouse in Marka, a coastal city in Lower Shabelle region, and burned over 300 sacks of food, claiming that the food had expired. The WFP responded by suspending its operations in Wajid, Bu'aale, Garbaharey, Afmadow, Jilib, and Beledweyne, citing a lack of security. The WFP has not been able to resume operations in southern Somalia.

The experience of the WFP was not unique; over the course of 2010, al Shabaab's shura council consolidated power and enforced bans on humanitarian aid agencies. By mid-September, at least seven other agencies were banned from Somalia, including Mercy Corps, Med-Aid, Horn Relief, World Vision, ADRA, Diakonia, and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). Al Shabaab was able to enforce this ban in Kismayo, Lower and Middle Shabelle regions, Hiraan region, and Lower and Middle Jubba regions. For those organizations that remained operational, access to communities became more restricted as the power structure of al Shabaab became more centralized in the shura council. These organizations also faced restrictions on their activities and were subjected to taxation. The conditions that forced the suspension of humanitarian aid activity in areas under al Shabaab's control continued into 2011 and remain in force today.

### **Current Conditions Under al Shabaab**

People who have fled al Shabaab-controlled territory in southern Somalia tell the same story – that draconian measures imposed upon the local population have driven many to leave. Local al Shabaab administrations follow the group's strict interpretation of *shari'a*, enforcing public observance of its laws with corporal punishments. Al Shabaab requires that both men and women abide by what it has determined to be Islamic dress and that women work only in the home and receive a male relative escort when out in public. The group has banned such activities as listening to music or watching soccer. There are reports that school-aged children have been forced to attend sessions with al Shabaab officials, to receive either religious or military training. In some cases, al Shabaab has required that every family provide a son to fight for the group, or pay \$50 per month. In addition to forced conscription, al Shabaab exacts taxes from local communities and businessmen. Further, local aid workers have noted that al Shabaab has repeatedly threatened them.

Many of the communities living under al Shabaab have been in need of food aid for months and the drought that has affected the region has compounded this need. Local community elders called on al Shabaab to lift its restriction on humanitarian assistance in April 2011 and warned of imminent starvation should food aid not arrive. Certain humanitarian aid organizations do have access to al Shabaab-controlled territories, such as Islamic Relief and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); however, these organizations remain limited in their capabilities to combat the spread of famine.

On July 6, al Shabaab spokesman Sheikh Ali Mohamed Rage announced, “All aid agencies whose objective is only humanitarian relief are free to operate” in al Shabaab-controlled territory and required that these agencies contact al Shabaab’s “Drought Committee.” Rage later clarified that the ban on certain agencies, such as the WFP, remained in effect and denied that there was a famine in Somalia. There are reports that local al Shabaab administrations may be more amenable than al Shabaab’s shura council to cooperation with larger international aid organizations. UNICEF, for example, landed a plane of food and medical supplies in al Shabaab-controlled Baidoa, the capital of Bay region. By and large, however, al Shabaab has remained hostile to many humanitarian aid agencies, claiming that they hold political agendas. Rage said of the famine, “Yes, there is drought, but the conditions are not as bad as they say. [The aid agencies] have another objective and it wouldn’t surprise us if they were politicizing the situation.” Al Shabaab’s leader, Sheikh Mukhtar Abu Zubair, reiterated this sentiment, “Aid agencies and some countries declared famine and pretend they want to help you. They do so for these reasons: for trade purposes, to convert you from your religion and to colonize you.”

Al Shabaab administrations have exploited local food resources, to the detriment of communities. As the conditions have deteriorated, al Shabaab has made exacting demands on the population. For example, in Bu’aale district in Middle Shabelle region, al Shabaab demanded a payment of \$30 for every hectare of arable land along Jubba River. In Afmadow in Lower Jubba region, some residents were required to feed al Shabaab militants, facing punishment should they refuse to do so. In Afgoi outside of Mogadishu, reports say that al Shabaab executed local herders who had refused to turn over animals for slaughter to the group. Al Shabaab militants have also diverted river water to commercial farmers who provide financial support for the group. Widespread relief efforts in these regions remain impossible because of al Shabaab. Those relief efforts that are conducted remain smaller in scale and many are run under the auspices of al Shabaab administrations.

The severity of the situation in southern Somalia has driven many families to seek humanitarian assistance in areas outside of al Shabaab’s control. An estimated 1,500 people arrive daily in Kenya’s Dadaab refugee camp, and about two to three hundred refugees arrive in Ethiopia’s Dolo Ado camp. The journey to the camp carries risks – banditry and armed militias throughout Somalia pose a threat to displaced persons. In some cases, al Shabaab has taken action to prevent Somalis from leaving its territory. The group has established roadblocks along primary routes used by refugees and has forced truckloads of people to return from where they came. For example, al Shabaab established roadblocks and checkpoints along the roads near Dhobley, a town on the Kenyan border, preventing many from gaining access to assistance across the border. Militants have also frequently inhibited Somalis’ entry into TFG-controlled territory in Mogadishu. Overall, al Shabaab has consistently denied freedom of movement to Somalis living under its control.

## **Prospects for Humanitarian Assistance in Southern Somalia**

It is necessary to recognize very real restrictions on humanitarian aid activities when considering the prospects of expanding operations into southern Somalia.

The humanitarian operating environment is precarious in the country even without the presence of al Shabaab. There have been few improvements on the security conditions since the UN first deployed a peacekeeping force in 1992 to secure the supply lines for humanitarian aid delivery. The only clear realized gains have been made in Mogadishu, where a peacekeeping force assists the weak, UN-backed TFG. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has a force presence of about 9,000 Ugandan and Burundian peacekeepers. Territory outside of the TFG and AMISOM's security perimeter has often been contested by various armed factions, and it is likely that any insertion of resources into such an environment will result in violence as it did in the early 1990s. There have already been documented attacks on aid convoys in Bay and Hiraan regions, during which at least one aid worker was killed. A significant escalation in humanitarian activities throughout southern Somalia will very likely increase the risks to aid workers' safety.

Though al Shabaab is not the sole guarantor of security in Somalia, the group poses the greatest threat to aid workers in southern Somalia. Al Shabaab's shura council has made clear that it will not accept the presence of international humanitarian aid organizations and that it will enforce this ban with violence. This fact remains true even as humanitarian conditions continue to deteriorate in areas under al Shabaab's control. Humanitarian aid organizations are ill-equipped to deal with the threat posed to their personnel by al Shabaab militants and it would be naïve to ignore the security aspect of any humanitarian operation in southern Somalia.

The international community should be under no illusions about the requirements of undertaking a humanitarian operation in southern Somalia. There is a high likelihood that any such operation, which would entail establishing security in the heartland of al Shabaab's territory, would be met with significant armed resistance. Al Shabaab's militias have already exhibited the ability to withstand AMISOM operations in Mogadishu, especially during its 2010 Ramadan offensive. During this offensive, al Shabaab militants successfully advanced the frontline of fighting toward AMISOM and TFG headquarters, despite the presence of 6,300 peacekeepers. It has taken a fifty percent increase in peacekeeping troops in Mogadishu and a sustained effort by the TFG to develop its own security forces to re-establish temporary control over the majority of the capital. Whereas in Mogadishu, al Shabaab conducted an insurgency against AMISOM and TFG troops, in southern Somalia, al Shabaab is the dominant power.

Al Shabaab has a very strong power base in major southern cities such as the ports of Marka and Kismayo. Al Shabaab is able to operate military training camps openly and will be able to call up forces quickly if challenged. An armed conflict in southern Somalia will likely require the deployment of Western ground forces, forces that could readily defeat al Shabaab militarily if called upon. The international community should not cling to the false belief that a humanitarian operation in southern Somalia could be successfully accomplished without ground forces supporting the mission.

The decision to pursue a humanitarian operation in southern Somalia ought to be made with these substantial costs in mind. Opting for a humanitarian aid operation in southern Somalia will require a military commitment. Seeking to purchase consent from or to cooperate with al Shabaab in order to insert humanitarian assistance into the south incurs future costs. Purchasing consent from al Shabaab does not guarantee future security or even the delivery of assistance to the people in need. What it does, however, is fund a virulent radical insurgent group that has stated its intentions to attack America and has increasingly established ties to al Qaeda's most operational franchise, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen. Cooperating with al Shabaab will likely permit the group to dictate aid distribution, strengthening al Shabaab in its territories. A humanitarian operation to respond to the spreading famine, however morally imperative, must not be undertaken without a full understanding of the full requirements and the associated risks.

APPENDIX: MAP OF SOMALIA

